

Miracle Eyewitness Reports



Darren M. Slade

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Influence of Miracle Claims

Miracle eyewitness reports are of paramount importance to both the history of religions and contemporary experiences of religiosity. However, defining a *bona fide* “miracle” often proves difficult when variant criteria and metaphysical assumptions are considered. Regardless of whether researchers believe miracles must necessarily circumvent natural physical laws or can occur through those same natural processes, it is evident that miracles inexorably involve the deliberate intervention of deity that causes an anomalous and religiously noteworthy event, which ultimately surpasses the ability of mere natural causal relationships in a given circumstance (Larmer 2014). The three Abrahamic faiths (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) are predicated on such miracles. As is believed among the faithful, God miraculously founded the Israelites (Gen. 21:1–6), and then miraculously liberated them from bondage (Exod. 14:15–31). For Christians, God miraculously dispatched the Messiah (Matt. 1:18–25) and then delivered him from death (1 Cor. 15). Finally, for Muslims, God

miraculously conveyed special revelation through the Qur’an (Surah 2:23; 52:29–34). Although numerous miracle claims are frequently discredited, there are still countless tens of thousands who claim to have personally witnessed or experienced a miracle in their lifetime (Keener 2011), including the vast majority of Pentecostal Christians around the world (Lugo 2006). The problem is that psychological studies consistently reveal that eyewitness claims are routinely inaccurate (Memon et al. 2003), making the existence of miracle eyewitness reports anecdotally difficult from a psychological perspective.

Accuracy and Suitability

Psychological variables associated with eyewitnesses can directly affect a miracle claimant’s accuracy and suitability. The term “accurate” here denotes a high degree of correspondence between an eyewitness’s testimonial and the actual stimuli produced during the claimed miraculous event (Köhnken 1989; Redman 2010). Likewise, “suitability” refers to the minimal cognitive, affective, and environmental characteristics most conducive for inhibiting those internal and external influences that may distort an eyewitness’s accuracy. These characteristics include a witness’s age, mental comprehension, any intellectual disabilities, and other practical issues to determine whether a claimant was

capable of perceiving and reporting the miracle event accurately (Bromby and Hall 2002; Memon et al. 2003). These inquiries help identify “defeating values” that would automatically disqualify a person as an accurate witness, such as being at a distance beyond 15 meters from the event or making observations when the visibility level was below 15 lux (Bromby and Hall 2002). In addition to the consumption of alcohol, drugs, and prescription medications, non-optimal conditions also include factors relating to weather, fatigue, illness, dementia, malnutrition, and dehydration, which can create “malleable witnesses” who are vulnerable to distortions in memory and perception (Memon et al. 2003; Smalarz and Wells 2013).

Psychological Variables

Assuming a miracle eyewitness is both suitable and credible, meaning they are not known to falsify, exaggerate, minimize, conceal, or delude information (Köhnken 1989; Memon et al. 2003), there are still numerous psychological variables that affect a person’s perception and memory of an event and, therefore, need consideration when evaluating miracle eyewitness reports. Kassir et al. (2001) presents a consensus among experts on the following factors that impair an eyewitness’s accuracy: the presence of threatening objects, which limits a person’s observation of other pertinent details; the length of time a witness observes an event; and the rate of memory loss, which is highest immediately after an event. Other variables include a person’s confidence, which is not a predictor of correctness since outside factors can alter assurance levels, as well as the wording of interview questions, which can adversely affect an eyewitness’s memory. Likewise, experts agree that people’s attitudes and expectations affect how they recall and subsequently interpret past occurrences; childhood memories are consistently incorrect or partially distorted; and child witnesses are less accurate than adults, especially since they are more susceptible to suggestibility, peer pressure, and social influences. Finally, the consensus is that people cannot reliably

discriminate between true and false memories. Due to “postevent misinformation,” testimonies often reflect material that they acquired only after an event has occurred.

Memory Issues

Memory encoding is the process of transforming external stimuli into a mental representation for later storage and retrieval. However, which aspects of an event become encoded depends on how much attention observers give to different details, as well as the lucidity and salience of the stimuli at the time of encoding. Regarding religiously noteworthy miracles, details that are more memorable are those with a unique relationship to the surrounding context or are personally relevant to the observer. Significant events, such as those associated with miracles, are likely to be more accurate than insignificant events, though memory distortion is also most prominent when events involve distressing elements. Moreover, a person’s culture, past experiences, preconceptions, personality, and preferences will dictate which details a specific miracle eyewitness will consider significant and salient (Redman 2010). With traumatic events in particular, emotional intensity encodes only some memories in some circumstances. However, evidence suggests that heightened arousal reduces the accuracy of memory recall (Wright et al. 2013). Additionally, young children and senior citizens over the age of 60 are prone to mistaken remembrances, thereby making it important to know precise details about the eyewitnesses, as well as how long they witnessed the miraculous event, their level of emotional stimulation, and the amount of importance they ascribe to the miracle itself (Memon et al. 2003).

It is important to realize that acutely traumatic events may result in memory repression, suppression, or partial amnesia of relevant details. Those events that an eyewitness considers salient due to surprise, heightened emotional arousal, and greater subjective significance will sometimes become “flashbulb memories,” which are exceptionally intense in clarity and precision during recall. Nonetheless, higher stress levels actually

impair and narrow the witness's perception of past occurrences. Though the individual believes their memory is especially accurate because of the trauma experienced, flashbulb memories are often inaccurate and deteriorate over time. There is even evidence that flashbulb memories do not form immediately after an incident occurs but, in actuality, begin to form several days later when discussing the episode with others (Memon et al. 2003; Redman 2010).

Another psychological variable is the "source-confusion" or "source-monitoring" error where people misattribute the origin of their memories to personal experiences that never ensued. For example, claimants may remember a miracle event when, in reality, they only heard or read about the incident happening to someone else (Memon et al. 2003). There are also certain biases that affect memory, as well, such as a "retrospective bias" where people superimpose their current experiences, feelings, attitudes, behaviors, and beliefs onto past events. The reverse is also true when people perceive and interpret a current event according to earlier experiences ("schema theory"). In effect, what people expect to see and hear affects their perception of reality. Once people assimilate a new interpretation about a past event, they are likely never to remember their previous beliefs about the episode. These errors can then become established fact and will perpetuate through continual retellings of the miracle, even after individuals learn that their recall is erroneous (Schacter and Scarry 2000; Redman 2010). A final variable involves time delay since memories are subject to rapid decay. The longer the amount of time between encoding and subsequent retrieval of a miraculous incident, the more susceptible eyewitnesses are to false postevent distortions (Lipton 1977).

Notably, persons directly involved in an event are less accurate in their recall than bystanders observing the incident from a marginal distance away. The presence of frightening objects and higher anxiety levels diminish an eyewitness's ability to recall important details about an occasion since they will tend to focus almost exclusively on the alarming aspects. The same is true for situations where an unexpected item or an

object that is inconsistent with the context appears in the situation, making eyewitnesses succumb to an object-focus effect (Maass and Köhnken 1989; Pickel 1999). Hence, bystanders are able to observe more details than those directly affected by a miracle event principally because bystanders will not experience the same heightened state of arousal and subsequent attentional funneling (Peace et al. 2015).

Postevent Interviewing

Miracle eyewitnesses are also susceptible to a postevent "misinformation effect," which occurs when other people interject details into an eyewitness's remembrance or when people mistakenly recall or speculate about event details, which then become part of the memory narrative itself. Eyewitnesses unconsciously invent details to supply information of "what must have happened" for things they did not directly observe (Saunders and MacLeod 2002; Memon et al. 2003). Likewise, a miracle eyewitness's confidence in the accuracy of their recollection increases the more times they retell their story. However, witnesses who express high levels of confidence are just as likely to make recall mistakes as others (Smalarz and Wells 2013).

Questioning miracle claimants may also inadvertently result in an "interviewer bias" where the questioner conveys details, stereotypes, or desired answers to eyewitnesses, which then prompts them to respond in a particular manner or forces them to guess in order to provide a definitive answer to the interviewer's questions (Lipton 1977; Hyman and Pentland 1996; Memon et al. 2003; Redman 2010). Known as "system variables," interviewers can unintentionally implant false memories by the way they ask their questions or through other conformity pressures (cf. Hyman and Pentland 1996). Similarly, a "confirming feedback effect" can occur when people, such as other religionists, display approval signals about a miracle story's authenticity. Simply expressing amazement or excitement about a miracle report can increase a claimant's sense of certainty about their recollection, which

then strengthens the perceived accuracy of a miracle report by non-eyewitnesses (Smalarz and Wells 2013).

Imagination and Fantasy Proneness

Certain miracle eyewitnesses are also susceptible to “imagination inflation” where a statistically significant number of people in the general population invent past experiences simply because they imagine an event occurring (Mazzoni and Memon 2003). A similar problem involves people with “dissociation” problems, who are incapable of differentiating between actual memories and fantasies. While their everyday memories remain intact, dissociative claimants easily transform their imaginative fancies into false memories because they are prone to creating fictional autobiographical narratives with the same type of salience as authentic memories and experiences (Memon et al. 2003). This “fantasy proneness” occurs mostly in those who routinely spend time imagining alternate realities, experience hallucinations, and have intense religious, paranormal, or out-of-body experiences (Merckelbach 2004; Hough and Rogers 2007–2008). By introducing the possibility of fantasy proneness, it becomes exceedingly difficult to distinguish between truthful miracle accounts and memories based on fantasies or overactive imaginations.

Conclusion

Because the manifestation of *bona fide* miracles is an essential element to the founding of different religions, as well as current experiences among persons of strong religious faith, it is important to recognize the psychological variables that could inadvertently distort or falsify a miracle claimant’s memory and perception of the event. It is important for researchers to remember that the sole source of miracle information is usually the subjective perception of individuals who experienced the alleged miraculous event. These autobiographical memories assist people in making sense of the world and reflect how they intuitively interpret miracles, which can then be used to

rationalize their personalized perception of reality. Thus, miracle stories are potentially molded in order to capture interest or justify religious beliefs and actions (Redman 2010). Certainly, not all miracle claimants are credible or suitable eyewitnesses, especially since many have an invested interest in devising miracle stories or are not actual witnesses to the miracle itself. However, even if a claimant is both credible and suitable, there is still the question of psychological soundness. The implication for religion is that psychological variables involving memory, postevent misinformation, imagination, and fantasy proneness need consideration when assessing the accuracy of miracle eyewitness reports. The potential psychological distortion on eyewitness testimonials is true of both historic miracle reports (e.g., the New Testament Gospels) and present-day spiritual experiences.

See Also

- ▶ [Active Imagination in Psychotherapy](#)
- ▶ [Christian Mysticism](#)
- ▶ [Cognitive Science of Religion](#)
- ▶ [Collective Unconscious](#)
- ▶ [Conscience](#)
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